

BUILDING BRIDGES: FROM LEARNING TO LIVING

An Evaluation

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Building Bridges is a year-long study program launched in 2002 for graduates of the two-year Melton Mini-School based at Chizuk Amuno Congregation in Baltimore. This article reports on a study that examined Bridges utilizing a control group of Melton graduates participating in other adult education programs. The study found that Building Bridges is highly successful at bringing about change in the spiritual lives and personal Jewish practices of its participants in a gradual way that minimizes alienation from family and the disruption of interpersonal relationships.

This article evaluates a sophisticated adult education program launched in 2002. It places the program in the context of current research in the field of adult Jewish education, reviews its content, describes the study's design, and reports the results.

ADULT JEWISH EDUCATION TODAY

Adult Jewish education has evolved into a field of study only in recent years. Pioneering research has been undertaken in response to the growing importance of adult Jewish learning beyond the yeshiva model. This research has drawn heavily on the general field of adult education and on Jewish identity studies.

These recent findings create a context for Building Bridges:

- Regardless of the starting point for adult Jewish learners, engagement in Jewish study tends to fuel the desire for additional study (Grant, 1999/2000).
- Learners do best when there is a balance between conveying the subject matter and providing time for reflecting on its significance to the learner, and when the curriculum is carefully sequenced (Schuster & Grant, 2003).
- Teaching needs to be anchored in students' feelings and actions (Schuster & Grant, 2003).
- Adult learners want communication with

their teacher to be mutual and safe (Schuster, 2003).

- If the learners form a mutually supportive group, this community aids in individual exploration of both ideas and practices and their subsequent reinforcement (Woocher, 1995).
- The expansion of understanding and practice reinforces Jewish identity (Horowitz, 2000).
- Learning takes place in the context of lives that are constantly changing as a result of shifts in family structure, finances, friendships, locales, careers, and self-understandings. As a result of these shifts, the search for a meaningful way of living never ends and is a major force fueling the adult learner's activity. Jewish learning at its best opens students to Torah as a source of meaning through the connections it offers to God, self, fellow students, and Jews who share in undertaking *mitzvot*.

BUILDING BRIDGES

Building Bridges, a project of Chizuk Amuno Congregation in Baltimore, Maryland, is a year-long study program for graduates of the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School (Melton). In 1997, Chizuk Amuno became the first congregation to host a Melton program—a two-year program that provides a pluralistic survey of the genres of Jewish literature, interactive study, and a ba-

sic vocabulary of key Jewish concepts and values. It examines key historical events, beliefs, and practices that define Jewish life.

Since its inception in 1984, Melton has reached thousands of people across the United States. Its success has demonstrated that there is a constituency interested in integrated and continuous adult Jewish learning experiences. Given the limitations of religious school education, adult programs like Melton have an important role to play. Placing the Melton program in a single synagogue makes more advanced learning easier to promote and helps foster Jewish seriousness at the core of congregational life.

Melton is a pluralistic program designed to attract Jews from a broad variety of backgrounds, observance patterns, and affiliations. As a result it avoids promoting any single Jewish ideology or pattern of observance. In fact, studies of the Melton program indicate it does not stimulate increased religious observance. In contrast, Chizuk Amuno has a goal of lifelong Jewish learning and promoting greater engagement with *mitzvot*. Its Melton program has graduated about 500 students, many of whom want to continue regular ongoing study after completing the Mini-School. This has created a constituency prepared to make a commitment to another full year of study. **Building Bridges: From Learning to Living** is the Chizuk Amuno program designed for that constituency. Building Bridges has been funded by the Hoffberger Foundation and the Joseph and Rebecca Meyerhoff Awards Committee, which also funded this study.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROGRAM

The Building Bridges course, developed by Judy Meltzer and Rabbi Ilyse Kramer, was first taught from August 2002 to June 2003. Bridges stresses spiritual development, exploration of a variety of *mitzvot*, and connecting the students' learning to changes in their Jewish living. It builds a bridge between study (*nishma*) and action (*naaseh*) in regard to a variety of *mitzvot*: Shabbat observance, kashrut, tzedakah, and acts of lovingkindness (*gemilut hesed*).

Bridges is not just a sequel to Melton; it moves in a new direction to fill a perceived gap in what Melton can accomplish while at the same time building on the knowledge and skills that students acquire through the Melton program. The premise of Bridges is a classical one—*lo hamidrash ha'ikar ela hama'aseh*, that the action that flows from study has central value.

Because the Bridges program is sufficiently different from Melton, pre-screening for all applicants was required of those wishing to enroll. This gave Meltzer and Kramer a chance to discuss the purpose of the class with applicants and to shape student expectations, so that only those interested in an experiential approach aimed at enriching and expanding their Jewish practice would choose to participate. While students were attracted to a continuation of Melton, they were clearly informed that Bridges is about *mitzvah*, observance, and exploring spirituality. This helped narrow down those who enrolled. Twenty-two students began the course, and 18 completed it.

The clarity of the goals of Bridges and the way that participants were informed of them are to be commended, as often adult learners enroll in classes based on their titles with little idea of any purpose for the class besides covering the subject matter. Indeed, few adult Jewish education classes state objectives that go beyond mastering the classes' subject matter.

Bringing change in people's everyday lives is unlikely to be accomplished in a classroom that emphasizes didactic or passive learning or if the learning experience is limited to the classroom. The design of Bridges reflected that recognition in several ways. In addition to the 25 weekly class sessions, it involved *hevruta*, students studying texts together in pairs. It also brought in an experienced teacher of Jewish spirituality for four sessions—two each semester—to introduce meditation, body movement, sophisticated ways of thinking about personal spirituality, and how they relate to personal Jewish prayer and practice. This approach

anticipated that as Bridges raised student expectations about communal prayer, they would need help in reshaping their understandings and capacities so that they could meet those expectations for themselves. In part this meant helping the students to move from a passive stance when participating in community worship toward one of taking responsibility for their own experience using tools acquired through Bridges.

Bridges provided students with many opportunities to study and share in hands-on experience of a number of *mitzvot*. The instructor developed a Mitzvah List as a means of teaching about 15 *mitzvot* over the course of the year and giving students opportunities to participate in them both in class and in gatherings outside of class hours. Students were encouraged to continue these practices on their own, with their families and/or with friends.

For example, visiting a *shiva* house received considerable attention because many students found themselves attending *shiva* minyanim and wanting to lead them, or at least to participate in *shiva* visits in a more traditional way. Beyond the group explorations of the Mitzvah List, in the last months of the course all of the students were asked to carve out time to practice one or more *mitzvot* that were of particular personal interest as they explored their individual spiritual paths. Students took responsibility for such varied activities as

- learning the *trop* (method of chanting) for the *Megillot* (biblical books chanted on holidays)
- making the grace after meals a part of daily life
- performing *havdala* (the ritual marking the end of Shabbat) at home
- taking part in *shiva minyanim*
- developing a regular meditation practice

There were regular meetings between the students and Kramer to review their progress and offer support to them on their personal religious journeys. To strengthen the impact

of the mitzvah experimentation and the other spiritual exercises, Bridges also relied on journaling.

Also important were group experiences outside the classroom. Participants and their families joined together for *Kabbalat Shabbat* and Friday night dinner, and *seuda shlishit* (the concluding meal of Shabbat) and havdala, the ritual marking the end of Shabbat. The class also spent a full Shabbat together. The informal group experiences created circumstances conducive to liturgical experimentation, personal expression, and interpersonal bonding that are typically unavailable in the well-attended and effective main services at Chizuk Amuno, which follow Conservative liturgical practice.

The depth and breadth of Bridges' educational design make the course considerably more expensive to run than most adult education offerings in the Jewish community, which are both shorter in duration and less intense. Clearly a greater impact on the participants, and potentially on the sponsoring synagogue and its community, was anticipated, thereby potentially justifying the larger expenditure that Bridges entails.

STUDY DESIGN

If we provide motivated adult Jewish learners with a knowledgeable, flexible, and engaging instructor who can serve as a Jewish role model, they will almost inevitably feel good about the experience and benefit from it. Many study designs do little more than illustrate this truth. They make everyone feel good without providing the critical feedback that should be their core purpose.

A more difficult and important question for evaluation is how we maximize students' learning. That question can only be answered if evaluators use methods that include carefully selected control groups. Furthermore, evaluation should assess whether the stated objectives of the program are satisfied. If a program is designed to improve the quality of Jewish leadership, for example, how will the follow-up be done to test whether people who finish the program are more effective

leaders than similar people who do not enroll? Without objectives-based and comparative evaluation, evaluators produce studies that put a stamp of approval on the undertaking without the critical feedback that would allow the program organizers to improve its effectiveness and allow funders to compare its effectiveness to that of other programs with similar objectives.

Because those who commission studies need feedback quickly in order to obtain the funding needed to keep programs going, the funding for studies usually runs out after the first year of the program. This means that the long-term impact of the program is not examined sufficiently. For example, a one-day immersion program in Hebrew can teach the pronunciation of the letters and create considerable learner satisfaction. A study of such programs should explore how often they result in students' ongoing Hebrew study, their increased participation in public worship, and their increased engagement with home ritual not just initially but over time. Achieving long-term changes in participants and their communities is usually the underlying motive for the sponsors of such programs, so studies should provide the basis for making decisions in light of those criteria.

Since the students in Bridges were exclusively graduates of the Melton Mini-School, this study utilized a control group of 14 members of other graduates of Chizuk Amuno's Melton program who had chosen not to participate in Bridges. They were matched as closely as possible by age, education, profession, observance, and personal history to those actually enrolled in Bridges.

A mid-year formative review instrument was administered to measure initial responses to Bridges and afford the instructor an opportunity to make any changes indicated. At the end of the course, a questionnaire similar to the initial one was used so that the changes could be charted in both the group that participated in Bridges and the control group.

THE STUDENTS: EVIDENCE FROM THE INTAKE INTERVIEWS

The participants in the Bridges program all had extremely positive experiences in the Melton program, which provided a major part of their motivation to enroll in Bridges. They expressed strong interest in this course as a continuation of that experience. Some expressed interest in Bridges' commitment to closing the gap between learning and doing. They are generally people who have engaged in Jewish study sufficiently often that they can be described as lifelong learners.

The participants reported that most of them are at least as Jewishly active as their parents. The majority are also the most Jewishly involved members of their households or nuclear families. In most cases their Jewish engagement has gradually grown as their life circumstances have changed. A few participants are single. Some are raising children. Many have grown children; some have grandchildren. This was not a class of twenty-something seekers.

Most of the class's members have considerable pride in their Jewish identity and have played leadership roles in a variety of Jewish settings. They are pursuing Jewish learning as part of a journey toward greater personal meaning, rather than as part of any organizational agenda. All expressed interest in spirituality but also evinced a lack of clarity about what it means or the impact it can have in their lives. This seems to reflect a conscious lack of prior experience with spirituality and of previous thought about what spirituality is.

Highly motivated learners, the participants were people who, despite extensive involvement with Jewish life, had had relatively little opportunity to explore issues of personal meaning. Their conventional backgrounds were in tension with their ambitions for greater Jewish and personal depth. Given their family and organizational situations, they seemed to be seeking not radical transformation of their lives but incremental growth and change.

The control group was remarkably similar, also indicating enthusiasm about Melton and interest in further study. They generally indicated that Bridges did not fit their schedules or their ability to make so large a commitment at the time, but that they were committed to ongoing study for themselves and would have been interested in Bridges had their circumstances been different.

THE STUDENTS AT MID-YEAR—FORMATIVE EVALUATION

The students reported that they were enjoying the Building Bridges class. Most of them were studying outside of class as well, either on their own or in other classes. They reported being only in the beginning stages of changing their practice; for most of them Jewish study was the *mitzvah* of choice.

Reporting a deepening understanding of Jewish life as a result of the class, they also reported that the changes they were making in their own lives usually were not shared with their families and friends. This issue—the interpersonal dynamics when someone wishes to expand his or her personal Jewish practice without any fundamental rearrangement of personal relationships—is partly addressed through the opportunities Bridges provided to bring family members to the group's Shabbat activities. The *havdala* experience was particularly welcomed both for its content and for the opportunity it presented to connect others to the Bridges experience.

Least comfortable for the students was their first exposure to meditation during the fall. While the text study about Jewish meditation was successful because it was part of a continuum of activity with which students were familiar, they experienced leaping into meditation itself as a radical departure from the Judaism they knew. In retrospect it is evident that more attention to making the Jewish connection to meditation was needed before asking the students to try something that was such a stretch for them. Several students said that doing something this new

for an entire two-hour session was too much. Beginning with shorter pieces would probably have reduced student resistance. The mostly middle-aged participants in Bridges, who were predominantly involved in Conservative congregations, needed more preparation for the meditation exercises than they received. As a result of the formative evaluation, more background and support was provided during the second half of the class. If the group had been younger or had had more members who had previously experimented with other spiritual forms, they would probably not have had so much difficulty with meditation.

Students at mid-year reported an increased experience of spirituality in that they felt more connected to Jewish tradition as a result of the understanding they gained through the class. Many reported experiencing daily life through more of a Jewish lens and Jewish life through a more informed lens. Changes reported included a greater connection to prayer life and holiday observances and a greater willingness to engage the meaning of prayers and the weekly Torah portion.

Most of the participants noted that the changes were very gradual. At the midpoint in the course, students reported relatively little success in maintaining the discipline of keeping a journal, but did report increased focus in prayer and more frequent prayer. They also reported interacting with family and friends around the content of the course. Their intellectual growth seemed to connect to greater understanding of prayers and resonance with them; for some this was a factor in increased personal prayer and, for some, increased attendance at public worship.

The control group at mid-year had not changed significantly regarding practice or spirituality since the fall despite the fact that most were engaged in Jewish study of one kind or another during the year. This indicates that Jewish learning does not necessarily have an impact on other forms of Jewish practice or consciousness about spirituality unless it is designed to do so.

More striking was the finding that members of the control group reported being satisfied with the way things were for them. They expressed only modest interest in spiritual development (e.g., "more gratitude"), a marked difference from the Bridges participants. How can this difference be explained, since they were similar to the Bridges participants before the class began? One possibility is that they were actually not interested in Bridges at all even though they said they were—perhaps not being honest with themselves or perhaps attempting to tell the interviewer what they thought the interviewer wanted to hear. Another possibility is that the Bridges people were interested in taking Bridges not so much because of the course content but because they wanted to continue the Melton experience; they then became committed to the goals of Bridges over time. In my opinion the likeliest explanation is that people have a strong need to feel good about their religious choices. The Bridges participants became more committed to change as a result of their choice, and the control group became more committed to the status quo as a result of their choices.

If that is the case, then those leaders of the Jewish community who would like to see an intensification of Jewish observance and study need to take a careful look at the study offerings in their communities. The investment in intensive, long-term programming like Bridges that is aimed precisely at issues of spirituality and observance can have a potentially far-reaching impact on attitude formation, to say nothing of knowledge and patterns of practice. This requires a substantial investment in the creation of such learning opportunities, an investment not frequently seen in congregations despite the common rhetoric about the importance of study and practice.

THE STUDENTS AT THE END OF THE YEAR

One striking characteristic of the students who remained part of the Bridges group for the whole year is that they mostly (13/16

responding) reported having a wonderful time.

The students expressed gratitude for their teacher and for the relationships they developed with their classmates. These mutually supportive relationships are particularly important to students undergoing changes that are not reinforced by their families and long-time friends. A network of support is needed if they are to follow through on changes while remaining part of their families and friendship networks. One illustrative instance occurred when one of the class's members was sitting *shiva*, and all the members of the class came and shared in that experience.

The success of the program design is judged more accurately by changes in student attitudes and practices. While adult students often develop a desire to continue studying with a charismatic teacher as they did with Kramer, the surveys show considerable evidence of their spiritual growth and change in practice over the course of the year. This is quite unusual for mid-life students who are already deeply immersed in Jewish study and organizational life. This change is even more unusual in that it was done in a way that did not result in dislocation from friends or family, though several students began worshipping at Chizuk Amuno and then joined there, leaving congregations where they had long been members.

One reason for the participants' ability to change while mostly remaining in place may be that their values (e.g., equality for women, commitment to family) were supported by Bridges. Therefore, changes in practice and spiritual self-understanding did not create undue tension with other life assumptions and relationships. Another reason may be the positive connections of family and friends to Bridges through its Shabbat celebrations that included them. Helping broaden observance and deepen spirituality without creating dislocation is a major accomplishment of the course.

Another measure of program success is

retention. Twenty-two people started the Bridges program, and 18 completed it. Given the length, complexity, and intensity of the program, that is a strikingly high retention rate. Also significant is the fact that most continued in a second-year Bridges curriculum (Bridges II) that began in fall 2003.

The participants in Bridges began the course with an attraction to *mitzvah* and observance. By the end of the course, they explicitly related these to God and spirituality, which was one of the course's principal objectives.

There was also a shift in observance; by the end more people saw themselves as more observant than their parents. In concrete terms most began attending Shabbat services more regularly, and several became regular weekday worshippers. Those who worship at Chizuk Amuno became a mini-worship community, with their friendships enriching their experience in the larger congregation, which is particularly important to the single and to the married participants whose spouses do not join them at services. The Reform-affiliated Jews in the group made Friday evening ritual a regular part of their lives. The participants saw themselves as increasingly involved in ritual, particularly Shabbat and holiday observance. Many incorporated *mitzvot* mastered during the course into their ongoing Jewish lives, which was intertwined with students' reported deepening of their spiritual lives.

By the conclusion of the course over 90% of the participants saw themselves as highly spiritual. One participant, for example, had identified himself as "more intellectual" on the intake survey, but commented on the end-of-year survey that "I have expanded my religious practices and spiritual understanding" over the course of the year. However, looking forward, only about half said they wanted further change, about the same as the control group. Given the degree of change that occurred over the year, this may reflect the desire for changes to be gradual and perhaps a fear of dislocation from family and friends as discussed above.

A different kind of change is reflected in the responses to another question— "Compared to a few years ago, are you more satisfied with your Jewish life now?" At intake, 39% answered positively. At the end of the course, 71% answered affirmatively. This reflects not only a growth in intensity of their practice but also a positive shift in participants' experience and attitudes toward their practice. It connects to student comments about their greater understanding of the meanings of prayers and rituals and their comfort with contemplating the meaning of the prayers and meditating during public worship.

The inclusion of family members in Shabbat activities reduced the potential stress from the difference in practice between participants and their families by helping increase the families' appreciation of what these practices mean to participants. There seemed to be tacit support for differences of religious practice within the families, with members recognizing and accepting these differences.

Since the Bridges participants indicated that they wanted modest growth and change, they seem to have benefited in the way that they had hoped. Their changes are in marked contrast with the control group, where observance actually went down over the year.

One striking finding is that the positive experience participants had with Bridges did not lead them to want to increase their organizational leadership. Most had been in organizational roles for many years and if anything wished to reduce those obligations. This suggests that, for those already substantially engaged in public worship and organizational life, increased observance and knowledge will not necessarily increase organizational engagement. In fact, as work on spiritual typologies suggests, the people who find the most meaning in prayer and observance will probably be a different group from those who gain the most satisfaction from leading organizations and engaging with issues of social justice. Synagogues and other organizations should not necessarily

expect the leaders in these two spheres to be the same people. If anything, the participants' spiritual growth and desire to continue toward greater practice helped them realize the extent of their burnout and dissatisfaction with some of their previous organizational roles. Committing increased time to study and practice conflicts with the burdens of organizational leadership.

Some organizations have noticed a pattern of their key leaders coming primarily from people in middle age or younger, even when there are many older people in the organization. This may reflect different drives at different stages in the life cycle. How we relate Jewish education and religious engagement to organizational leadership may shift as we develop more complex typologies for the stages of lifelong learning, leadership, and commitment. The pursuit of meaning is at the top of Maslow's pyramid after meeting needs for food, clothing, and shelter. From that perspective, we should not be surprised that increasingly our meaning seekers are not young people looking for gurus, but mature people who have achieved a reasonable level of material comfort and safety. For such people Bridges provides an important opportunity for seeking meaning. They, in turn, help to provide a richer spiritual core in their congregations.

THE FUTURE OF BRIDGES

Most of the students from last year's class wished to continue their studies. Eight enrolled in Bridges 2, a sequel to Bridges. They also joined with participants in a new Bridges 1 for Shabbat celebrations and acted as buddies for the Bridges 1 participants. Clearly the desire of Bridges 2 students to continue reflects the success of the program. This was also reflected at an opening panel that Bridges 2 participants provided for Bridges 1. The panelists spoke openly and comfortably about being on a "journey" and about the expansion of their relationship to *mitzvot*. This suggests that participants see their growth not as an effort to conform to

"correct" behavior but as an opportunity for enriching their lives.

The problems with obtaining funding for Bridges raise complex questions about how Jewish institutions weigh the quantity of different adult education offerings and the number of participants in adult education against the intensity of the offerings and the amount of change achieved. One of the issues worthy of consideration is what works to build the number of deeply engaged, knowledgeable, and enthusiastic synagogue members, as this may well have valuable secondary effects in the congregation. Of course such intense offerings should not replace efforts that attract those not ready for such intensity. A balance is needed. In a congregation with the extraordinary breadth in adult education that Chizuk Amuno offers, Bridges 1 and 2 offer depth and intensity important to the congregation's stated mission.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Bridges reflected the state of the art in adult Jewish education. Its melding of study, experimentation, reflection, group-building activities, celebration, and support of personal journeys is highly effective in helping participants learn, change conduct, and deepen their spiritual sensibilities. Providing information and orientation activities that help participants self-select and prepare for the nature of the course plays an important role in creating a group willing to undertake a journey of transformation as far-reaching as that of Bridges. Providing a teacher with sufficient knowledge, enthusiasm, sensitivity, and teaching skill is critical to the program's success.

Participants responded with particular enthusiasm to *hevruta* study, to group Shabbat observance, and to the gradual changes that Bridges supports. Long-term follow-up is needed to test whether changes in learning and observance patterns are lasting, but the short-term results are excellent. This is in marked distinction to changes in those enrolled in the Melton Mini-School program. The transformation of these mature students'

self-understanding, behavior, and commitments without substantial dislocation from their family and friends is an extraordinary achievement. One part of the key to this accomplishment is the invitation to family members to join in the group's Shabbat activities. Another part lies in support for the continuity of key values like egalitarianism and commitment to family.

Increased commitment to study and observance with concomitant growth in service attendance does not make learners more interested in organizational leadership. While Bridges participants have played leadership roles before participating in the program, their increased engagement in meaning-seeking activities if anything decreased their enthusiasm for involving themselves with organizational maintenance tasks.

Nevertheless, the program adds substantially to the religious core of the congregation, bringing participation, enthusiasm, and freshness to that core. By deepening the lives of the participants and enriching the lives of their congregations, Bridges is having a significant impact. Its expansion to other sites and increased funding are fully justified for those who endorse its objectives. If the program is expanded in this way, attention to careful selection of teachers and screening of students is critical to guaranteeing the ongoing success of the program.

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